

The Relational Bent of Community Participation: the challenge social network analysis and Simmel offer to top-down prescriptions of 'community'

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Abstract

The policy language of recent UK governments in relation to 'activating' communities has drawn on images of 'community' as coherent constructions - communities of place - recognisable to their members who are capable of concerted action. From this conceptual basis localities

identified as 'ineffective' are encouraged to become 'successful, integrated communities' through government action such as New Labour's Working Together neighbourhood policies and the more recent Big Society initiatives of the Conservative-led Coalition Government. The shared fallacy is that individuals are policy-receptive actors with the potential to engage in community life 'successfully' (consensually) once 'empowered' to do so. This paper questions the efficacy of applying politically neutralized values of empowerment, community and participation in government policy to 'real world' communities by applying the lessons of a case study of the lived experience of community action in the late 1990s, during an arguably golden policy era of government sponsored community participation. In this study, the work of Georg Simmel was used to highlight the dynamism of human associations and the co-presence of apparently contradictory currents of conflict *and* co-operation. Qualitative network analysis illustrated the webbed intricacies of participating in 'community' and the importance of recognising conflict as an element of the *whole process* of participation - which should not be elided by policy makers. The paper concludes that conflict has a positive role to play in sustainable community processes: it is both an undeniably inherent element of participation and a democratic imperative.

Keywords: networks; 'big society'; community participation; relationality; conflict; Simmel

Introduction

The policy language of recent UK governments in relation to 'activating' communities has tended to draw on an image of community as a coherent construction recognisable to its members who are capable of concerted action if 'enabled' to do so. The UK Coalition government's Big Society and localism ambitions, like the New Labour governments before it, fixes on the idea of prescribing a specification of active community as consensual and proactive and, therefore, a means of addressing the deficiencies of communities perceived as 'ineffective' (Buser, 2012; DETR 1998a; DETR 1998b; DCLG 2010, 2012; HM Government 2012; Hancock, Mooney and Neal; 2012). To put it another way, individuals in communities continue to be regarded as policy-receptive actors who have the potential to perform community correctly and for the greater good once empowered to do so by central government. Whilst the ideological starting points, aims and policy instruments may not totally correspond between the two governments despite their neoliberal underpinnings, the invocation of community as a widely held aspiration does. This includes the necessity to empower, to involve and to participate - with the notions of 'working together' and 'giving power to people' (Blair 1996; Cameron, 2009) denoted as unquestionably good things, and requiring changes in the behaviour of both individuals and institutions.

Historically, this kind of policy rhetoric can be linked to a perceived crisis in representative democracy with falling voter turnouts bringing the legitimacy of elected representatives and governments into question (Offe, 1985:196; Taylor, 2012)). Since at least the 1990s the term 'participation' has been loosely applied to initiatives that 'involve' citizens in their communities; a trend which is observable in the policy literature of national, international and supranational bodies (Taylor, 2011: chapters 7 & 8). However, whilst posited as a means of empowering and giving 'voice' to disillusioned citizens, its utilization also denotes significant changes to the construction of the citizen *and* of the political environment; specifically, with the enrolment (or co-option) of civil

society actors into governmental processes (Cochrane, 1986:59-62; Taylor: 2011).

The idea of civil society as an unmediated and altruistic space between the state and citizens characterized by direct relations and distinct from the institutions of the state has a long history (Williams, 1976: 65). However, that ideal type belies the fact that civil society is a politicized entity (not apolitical or pre-political) *and*, politically malleable; it is neither unmediated by nor exempt from (neo-liberal) ideology (Alexander, 1998:8; Crouch, 2011:20; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004:114). Civil society has been articulated as a property of governmentality (Ling, 2000: 87 – note 1), promoting consensual values, behaviours and attitudes embodied in the ‘active citizen’ and set up in opposition to post-war ‘big state’ approaches (Clarke and Newman, 1997:pp134-136). Implicated in this process is the appropriation of community development discourses – empowerment, inclusion, participation, sustainability and so forth (Gilchrist, 2009: 37) – constituting a ‘productive subjection through new discourse and practices’ (Clarke and Newman, 1997:31). In this way, New Labour ‘third way’ policies redrew the boundaries of civil society (used interchangeably with a ‘third sector’ terminology (Taylor, 2011: 58)) and recast government as an enabling partner to empowered, active and ‘responsibilized’ (Clarke: 2005) citizens working together in their communities. With the election of a Conservative-led Coalition government in 2010, the global economic crisis has been used to justify public spending cuts, a punitive programme of welfare retrenchment, and the further reframing of the state’s role and citizens’ responsibilities in a ‘big society’ (Albrow, 2012: pp105-115). There has been a concomitant return to the notion of civil society as a separate sphere to the state and possessed of properties inaccessible to ‘big government’ but inhering in a ‘big society’ (ibid:113; Office for Civil Society, 2012). The manipulation of radical language remains and the centrality of the responsible citizen continues, albeit reconstructed as an individualized,

enterprising and freed up actors eager to volunteer and deliver local services: 'from state power to people power' (Cameron, 2010).

The trends I have outlined here form the context and cover the timeframe of the paper's concerns taking in the construction of a participative citizenry across the 1980s and 1990s and into the new century, and the renewed emphasis on empowered citizens as responsible *individuals* in their communities in the 2010s. However, at the same time as governments have sought to activate citizens in particular ways, disciplining and intoning a specific set of behaviours for citizens *and* for policy implementers, contentious civic action has been 'othered' and distinguished from acceptable expressions of community participation. Deriding bottom-up community action as the conduct of self-interested individuals and detrimental to the 'real' needs of the community (typically, NIMBYs – Not In My Back Yard - in planning matters) impoverishes understandings of the complexities of real world participation and the valuable lessons it presents for policymakers. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to challenge the efficacy of neutralized values of empowerment, community and participation in government policy. To do this it addresses three interrelated tasks: it examines the shared weaknesses of the New Labour governments' community policies and that of the Coalition government's Big Society ambitions; it highlights how the insights of the classical sociologist Georg Simmel (1904; 1955) on conflict and the relationality of human life support a more meaningful exploration of the *realpolitik* of community engagement; and, drawing on Simmel's insights, it discusses an empirical example of the thick complexity of networked processes of community action which contradict the thin versions of participation envisaged in policy. The paper concludes by noting the redundancy of cosy concepts and quick fixes and suggests that policymakers engage with the processual complexity of community life to develop policies which are democratically-driven, widely supported and, thus, effective. In this respect both ethnographic research in communities and community development work have a role to play.

Community Participation and the Big Society

The Big Society vision of the UK Coalition government exhorts citizens to participate in their communities *of place* (DCLG, 2012: 7) and seeks to distinguish itself from previous government policy with a greater focus on individuals in communities and a 'real' commitment to decentralize power (HM Government, 2010; Localism Act, 2011). The Decentralization and Localism Bill describes the 'essentials': to 'lift the burden of bureaucracy'; to 'empower communities to do things their way'; to 'increase local control of public finance'; to 'diversify the supply of public services'; to 'open up government to public scrutiny'; *and*, 'to give local people a bigger say over what happens in their communities' (HM Government, 2010: pp6-11). Further, by strengthening 'accountability to local people' with 'a first allegiance' to local people on the part of service providers, citizens will be helped 'to reengage with what goes on in their communities' thus displacing the 'top-down bureaucracy of accountability to the centre and therefore control *by* the centre'(ibid; emphasis in the original). The Localism Act, 2011 enshrines in law 'a new set of rights for communities', 'marking a revolution in the way the country works by putting power back in the hands of people through a radical package of reforms and new freedoms' (DCLG, 2011). These strong assertions coupled to apparently self-explanatory concepts of 'community', 'citizens', 'local people' and what constitutes 'a bigger say' are yet to be fully borne out in implementational terms and questions remain as to who exactly is being addressed here and how such broad aspirations can be translated into concrete and efficacious action.

These burgeoning issues are not dissimilar to those raised by New Labour's approach to community and participation. However, whilst New Labour constructed the local authority as a 'community leader', 'in touch with the people' and capable of facilitating community participation (DETR 1998a; DETR 1998b), the Coalition government's relationship with local government is, perhaps, less sympathetically drawn. There is a tendency to identify 'local people' as the recipients of 'new powers' of 'local control'

rather than local government; although, so far, there is little evidence of this materializing on the ground (Buser, 2013:23; Eyre, 2014). The suggestion is that local government too is a 'burden of bureaucracy' which central government will free people from. Buser (2013:14) highlights the paradox of central government pledging to decentralize at the same time as maintaining its control of local government through national policy frameworks, compacts and financial controls: the 'have your cake and eat it' managerialism which was evident in New Labour's governance arrangements.

The discursive linking of 'community', 'participation' and (therefore) 'empowerment' was emblematic of the New Labour approach with a distinctly integrative interpretation of empowerment, demonstrated in the narrow remit of policy documents which focused upon 'public participation that is *deliberately* stimulated by local authorities' (Lowndes et al, 1998). Consideration of radical or 'ad hoc' forms of participation were excluded and the emphasis placed, first and foremost, on participation as a task to be managed by government and with a presumption that the local authority is, and should be, the legitimate and harmonious locus of participatory activity (ibid; Holman, 2001). However, in practice, 'working together' often brought into conflict the elected (councillors) with the empowered (neighbourhood groups) (DETR, 1998a, Holman, 2001; Sullivan, 2009:52).

The strategic communitarianism deployed in New Labour policies which emphasized partnership working between the state, its agencies, communities and community members, with the state acknowledged as having a legitimate and active presence in civil society, has been reset by the Coalition government's disaggregating approach to community engagement (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012:32). This is epitomized by the institutionally 'arms-length' role of the community organiser (Voice4Change provides a good overview of the role) and entails galvanising individuals into action on discrete, time-limited, small scale projects of their own and in their own communities: examples include

setting up a men's group and a community litter pick (Community First, 2012). There are differing interpretations of the purpose and empowering potential of engagement in such low-level community actions promoted but poorly resourced by government (where senior community organisers' training is funded for the first year only during which time part-time unpaid community organisers must be recruited and independent funding sourced thereafter (Voice4Change, 2012)). Self-motivated and community-owned activities can be seen as more authentic and empowering compared to activities instigated by institutional actors (CD Challenge Group in Gilchrist, 2009:35). The notion of small, sustainable steps to stronger communities also resonates with communitarian ideals and republican notions of citizenship as a route to meaningful democratic engagement (Tam, 1998; Pettit, 1997). For others the approach lacks credibility and the power to instigate meaningful change, and is a deliberate attempt to undermine remunerated community development workers who may take a more agonistic approach (Bunyan, 2012:131; Gregory and Notcutt, 2012; Stott, 2009). For these critics, the originator's version of community organising, Saul Alinsky's (1972) radical power-based approach, is relinquished for a more consensual and far less challenging version.

Ultimately, neoliberalism forms the wider context to government policy (Bunyan, 2012: 121; Hancock, Mooney and Neal, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012) setting limits on the language of policy and the choice of policy instrument. Indeed, as Hancock et al note, 'community provides no opposition to, and can be employed to facilitate, neoliberal imaginaries of an alternative to state provided welfare' (2012:354). Furthermore, the continued stress on consensus as a prerequisite for meaningful community engagement forecloses any real consideration of conflict in the myriad day to day activities of communities and the local authorities which serve them (themselves, complex organisation operating in complex conditions). If government genuinely wishes to facilitate community participation and empowerment it must come to terms with

the presence of conflict in 'real world' communities rather than glossing over its presence and passing the problem down to the policy implementer. In most cases, this is local government - invariably left to patch and prune on the ground to demonstrate the achievement of set targets and thus its continued legitimacy as a funded arm of government (Eyre, 2014). The next section of the paper will address this policy lacuna.

Community Participation and Conflict

Community, as a physical locality – 'the neighbourhood' (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan, 2007:99-133), continues, then, to be used as *the* authentic point for, and holder of, an active citizenry that can be enabled 'to come together locally as an integrated community' and where government will 'give people the power, knowledge and control' (HM Government, 2010:7). As with the previous New Labour governments, the Conservative-led Coalition frames its particular incantation of participation in communities as 'enabling' and 'empowering', contesting that participation transforms a 'passive citizen' into an 'active citizen' (ibid), conceived of as a self-evidently, and non-antagonistically, good thing. And, similarly, current policy also disciplines local state and civil society actors (Buser, 2013:14; Eyre, 2014; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Sullivan, 2009:53). What continues to be underplayed – if acknowledged at all - are the inherent conflicts and tensions which form part of the weave of community life. That is not to say that these tensions will inevitably lead to complete social breakdown, but rather to impress that policy is mediated at the local level, making, for example, measures to encourage participation and consensus building in communities far more complex and unpredictable than that proposed by policy makers.

Problematically, then, the idea of 'conflict' is barely registered (exceptionally, see DETR, 1999a). When it is addressed it is as an outlier, an anomaly at odds with the 'true' spirit of community, empowerment and participation; with each of these concepts conceived of as unified in content, self-explanatory good things, wholly positive in their aims, execution and effects, and above 'reactionary parochialism' (Burns,

Hambleton and Hoggett, 1994:164). If conflict is admitted, it is seen as a negative property – especially of dissenting political voices: NIMBYs and ‘the usual suspects’ – to be managed out so as not to hinder the ‘proper’ expression of community (DETR, 1999b). A reductive approach to community with emblematic representations of ‘local people’, ‘the community’, and ‘citizens’ ‘working together’ cannot engage meaningfully with dissensus and conflict. ‘Writing out’ conflict weakens critical understanding and leads to erroneous conclusions that local government actors’ and the communities they serve are failing in their responsibilities to create the desired ‘strong, united communities’ (DCLG, 2012: 6). The lightweight version of community in policy documents and enforced through government funding criteria for local projects is both unrealisable (and undesirable) in the dynamic context of living communities. As a result policy outcomes are ambiguous and limited, and policy implementers – local government, civil society and citizens – are undermined as ‘effective’ policy actors.

If we accept this is a problem and of the magnitude proposed, how can it be addressed? An empirical investigation into the dynamics of real world community participation suggests a starting point (Holman, 2001). In this world people do not necessarily know if they are citizens, or want to be; are not sure what empowerment is; have divergent views of where and what constitutes their community; have strong/weak views and inclinations across a range of issues; *and*, do not always agree or get on. This is also a world that is temporal and networked: where networks overlap and individual autonomy fluctuates, and where dissensus, consensus and indifference mutually inhabit layers of human interaction. From this ontological starting point the norm of community as a unified geographical entity which is harmonious (or aspiring to be) has to be supplanted with a more contingent understanding where diverse and open-ended expressions of participation in ‘real world’ locations are inflected by multiple conflictive, co-operative and contradictory processes. Specifically, conflict in communities has to be accorded equal

consideration to consensus and co-operation. From this perspective, then, 'community' and 'participation' look far more complex, presenting both a theoretical and analytical challenge to the researcher, and raising questions - as relevant in the Big Society context as for the previous governments' community policies - about how these processes can be better understood.

Community Participation: Simmel and Conflict

The earliest engagement with the relational embeddedness of conflict in social forms comes from the work of the German sociologist, Georg Simmel. There has been an international resurgence of scholarly interest in Simmel's work including his development of a sociological theory concerned with *process* (as opposed to agency and structure). Simmel's relational social theory and his insights on conflict (1904; 1955) informed my study of community participation during the 'third way' era of a New Labour government (Holman, 2001).

Simmel argued that conflict is a form of 'sociation', this being the 'particular patterns and forms in which men [*sic*] associate and interact with one another' (Coser, 1977:179). Conflict is considered 'one of the most vivid interactional forms of sociation' (Simmel, 1955:13) and 'the very essence of social life' (Coser, 1977:187). For Simmel, conflict is comprised of *integrated* positive and negative aspects (Simmel, 1955:14). His contention is that, 'definite actual society does not result only from other social forces which are positive, and only to the extent that the negative factors do not hinder them' but where 'contradiction and conflict ... precede ... [and] are operative at every moment of its existence' (Simmel, 1955: 14-16). Furthermore, he impresses that, 'a group which was entirely centripetal and harmonious - that is, 'unification' merely - is not only impossible empirically, but it would ...display no essential life-process and no stable structure' (Simmel, 1904:491). He, therefore, deepens our understanding of conflict as a symbiosis of negative and positive forces, and its necessary role in making actual society possible. By arguing that conflict is as much a

positive factor in the holding together of the social world as is co-operation and that 'actual society' cannot exist without it, he challenges us to question arguments for unreflective consensus building and to recognise the reciprocity and vitality of 'the manifoldness of actual existence' (ibid:494). Conflict, then, is a key ingredient in 'moving things along'. From this perspective, it is impossible to write conflict out of participation.

Simmel highlights processual elements: the power-infused relational 'co-mingling', 'converging and diverging currents' of 'transience' and 'variability' for which, empirically, I read, the wholeness and vitality of whole persons engaged with other whole persons (as opposed to abstract and partial representations of 'the people') in a dynamic web of interactions - and non-interactions - across space and time. He brings to our attention the 'impulse of opposition' even in the midst of the most 'harmonious relationships' (ibid:502) and captures the life-force and paradox of existence at the moment of its unfurling: the movement of conflictive and cooperative forces preceding and running between human relations in complex ways. For Simmel, the social is an 'event' (more fluid than in the conventional sense): 'events' co-exist as relational processes (Pyhtinen, 2010:72) and are suffused by the dynamism of reciprocal relations of conflict and co-operation, intended and unintended consequences.

It is his insights on conflict and the relationality of human life that make it possible to more fully comprehend community relations in their vibrant 'beingness' and corporeal wholeness, from single encounters to the multi-dimensionality of networks. Moreover, he provides the theoretical corrective to the political valorisation of consensus in participation as a fixed/fixable and an unequivocally equilibrium-bearing property.

Community Participation: the 'Real World'

Analytically, the challenge is one of how best to capture and understand these dynamic processes, a key task in the original study (Holman, 2001). The study – an ethnographically driven mixed methods case study

with networks at its core – was conducted in a large market town, the administrative centre of a borough council in a mixed rural area of the UK. It took place from 1997 to 2001 across the cusp of government change from Conservative to New Labour and through New Labour's early period in government. The empirical focus of the research was simply on how, after many years of Conservative council dominance and national Conservative rule, the newly elected (1996) Labour-led council's espousal to empower people would be achieved. Would their 'putting people first' agenda eschew the narrow government formulations of community participation by engaging with the more complex and relationally rich contexts of community action in the area? Its leaders certainly took participation as a planned programme of community activities seriously but were far less confident in enacting their commitment in relation to the more antagonistic dilemmas in community life. Consensus conferencing was therefore readily engaged with, whilst the contestation produced by planning decisions, from increasingly well-organised and networked groups in the area, took longer to assimilate into their participatory nexus, and followed a protracted period of simply 'sitting in a trench with the shells raining down and just putting up with it' (Interviewee 20398 – Council Leader).

Amongst a number of contentious issues vying for attention (I document tenant participation as well as community involvement in the original study), and in the context of this strategic change of direction for the council, was the selling off of council-owned land to a major supermarket chain opposed by an association of activists and groups ('The Alliance'), and which, thanks to the discourse-savvy skills of two key activists, quickly became known as 'The Old Town'. The Alliance was formed of a disparate number of groups and individuals (thirteen openly involved; one covertly involved) who had differing views on how this package of land should or should not be developed. Therefore, they did not operate as an easy consensus but, instead, agreed to disagree and to come together in

opposition to the council's view, under the single assertion that 'it ought not to have a supermarket built on it' (Interviewee 200798).

The Alliance and the subsequent network of relations on this issue did not spring up from a vacuum: it is important to bear in mind extant relations, many of some duration, and also the duration of Alliance action over years developing new relational histories. Proximity, temporality and the multiplexity and interweaving of people's lives engaged with the issue, even tangentially, influenced the character of exchanges which could open up, transform or close down avenues for action producing consequences not easily foreseen. Therefore, although some rather terse exchanges between Alliance members and the Council took place - becoming less so as a working relationship developed - these were never quite the stark engagements that, at first sight, they appeared to be. With so many actors in the field, behind every interaction recorded was a set of relationships that interconnected and overlapped in a variety of ways giving empirical credence to Elias' claim that 'underlying all intended interactions of human beings is their unintended interdependence' (Elias, 1969:143). And councillors and council officers - often represented as above or separate to the communities they serve and blinkered by the institutional imperatives of local government or the exigencies of the political group - were equally implicated in these relational processes. In their respective roles some had worked with, or against, Alliance members on different issues over time, and in their personal lives many lived in the town and had various connections to Alliance members. For example, a leading Labour councillor promoting the supermarket development was also a long-standing friend of the local Friends of the Earth Chair who opposed the development and was active in the Alliance. Their relationship at that point was described as 'a bit tricky at times' but that they were 'tolerant of each other's views' (Interviewee 11598). Such examples illustrated the difficulties thrown up by 'real world' community participation but also the opportunities, such as (mutual) soft intelligence gathering.

These actors, then, shared a vivid relational space along multiple planes of their life-worlds involving an altogether deeper notion of participation. Strategically, Alliance members were particularly adept at exploiting this, drawing upon their experience, their connections and skills developed through their 'other lives' as resources; whereas local government actors had less flexibility in this respect. However regardless of which 'side of the fence' actors publicly placed themselves, there was a penetrating depth and wholeness to their experiences of participation which, inescapably, included both conflictive and co-operative relations.

To make tangible, and sense of, this dynamic process of relations involved the careful mapping out of interviews, using key informant interviews as the framework, to represent and grasp processual 'events': the co-presence of conflictive and consensual flows involving multiple actors and planes of action across time. Representing interview data diagrammatically exposed the dense pattern of interactions between key actors and the more open interactional patterns of new or tangential actors in the network (national bodies, political groups, local media and so forth, increasing the network to thirty-five identifiable actors). Mapping in this way highlighted the prevalence of (colour coded) strands of co-operative *and* conflictive activity operating at different levels of proximity and time-frames between actors. It demonstrated that co-operative relations did not exist wholly in the absence of conflictive relations and vice versa and, crucially, that the presence of conflict in the network did not fatally undermine the participatory process. Conflict was shown to be as important as co-operation in 'real world' participation and, indeed, could not be abstracted from the participatory processes under observation. Certainly, conflict *contributed* to the breakdown of individual relationships and the disappearance of others from the network, yet it also made allies of others, introduced new personnel and helped build and rebuild relations *as part of an ongoing process*.

These findings contradict the consensual, discrete and depoliticized depiction of community participation as the route to establishing effective

participation and support Simmel's theory on the properties of conflict (1904; 1955). However, they are incomplete and under-theorised without an examination of power (as in the original study which adapted Clegg's 1989 work on organisational power). Suffice to say, in this short paper, that the power asymmetries between actors - their variable access to economic, organizational, political, social or cultural capital - are a feature of networks, but that different forms and levels of capital can be strategically deployed in situationally specific ways *if the actors concerned are able to recognise their strategic relevance and exploit the opportunities opened up in networked processes*. According to Bauman (on Elias, 1989:41), asymmetries of power mean that whilst interdependency may constrain actors 'it constrains actors in different ways'; however, , the intended and unintended mutuality of interactions and the fluidity and complexity of relations demonstrated here suggest this is a far from predictable process.

The methodology outlined - focused upon temporal flows of real world community participation - undoubtedly gives us different answers to what participation means, answers which largely do not correspond to those sought by policymakers. But the value lies in the shift of perspective to *in situ* and diverse processes of community participation opening up new critical spaces and demonstrating there are alternatives to the 'realities' constructed by policy. In particular, this approach highlights the co-existence of conflictive and cooperative relational flows in complex forms of community participation and which are inherent in *all* forms of human association. This introduces a more realistic appreciation of the limits and potentialities of participation sponsored by government and suggests that if 'putting power back in the hands of the people' (DCLG, 2011) is a serious ambition policymakers need to be better attuned to the particularities and *realpolitik* of community life.

Conclusion

This paper has taken issue with the neutralized versions of community and participation prevalent in the government policies of New Labour and

the Conservative-led Coalition government. Policy rhetoric has continued to prescribe a specification of active and consensual communities in order to 'work together' or address 'ineffective communities' (Bunyan, 2012; Buser, 2012; DETR, 1998a; DETR, 1998b; DCLG, 2010, 2012; HM Government, 2012; Hancock, Mooney and Neal, 2012). In this way, individuals in communities continue to be regarded as policy-receptive actors who have the potential to perform community 'correctly' and for the greater good once empowered to do so by government. The Coalition government's Big Society policy rhetoric packages together various initiatives claimed to be genuinely decentralizing which will put 'power back in the hands of people' (DCLG, 2011). This includes a peculiarly underpowered and underfunded community organiser programme which runs only to the end of the administration's time in office. Emerging empirical studies are already highlighting the failings of Big Society initiatives in complex 'real world' contexts and the impact of austerity measures on local policy implementers (Eyre, 2014). These are costly failings, financially and politically, and which exhaust goodwill and trust at the local level as 'community' initiatives – and funding – come and go.

The paper proposes an alternative standpoint to the 'problem of community' which, admittedly, does not provide easily digestible lessons for policymakers. The process of 'real world' community participation is complicated (as any local government officer will tell you); nonetheless, that does not absolve policymakers from the responsibility of developing a more sympathetic response to the complexity of participating in 'real world' communities. Policymakers need to be persuaded to relinquish their rhetorical and damaging attachment to cosy concepts and short-term quick fixes that have limited application. Instead, the case needs to be made for an informed appreciation of the presence of conflict as a democratic necessity in *sustainable* community processes. Community development work and research has a role to play in supporting policymakers' understanding of these processes and in facilitating the democratic imperative in community networks on the ground (Gilchrist,

2009). This is important as, in the final analysis, policies do not fail because community actors are at fault; policies fail because they make assumptions that do not relate to the tenor and dynamism of human relations – the real 'big society'.

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